



News Release

Rhode Island National Wildlife Refuge Complex

Block Island NWR □ John H. Chafee NWR at Pettaquamscutt Cove □ Ninigret NWR □ Sachuest Point NWR □ Trustum Pond NWR

50 Bend Road, Charlestown, RI 02813

401/364-9124 Fax: 401/364-0170

For More Information, please call:

Erin King, Wildlife Biologist – extension 19

Janis Nepshinsky, Visitor Services Manager, extension 28

Piping plovers return to Rhode Island after mild winter

April 16, 2012 – Piping plovers typically return to their breeding grounds in April but in recent years their arrival seems to be getting earlier and earlier. They have been in Rhode Island for several weeks already and are currently busy establishing nest sites on our beaches. Males typically return before the females to set up and defend their area and will start creating pre-nests, often called scrapes. Scrapes are small depressions in the sand that are sometimes lined with small stones or shell fragments, one of which the female will eventually lay her eggs.

The Atlantic piping plover is a small, stocky, sandy-colored bird resembling a sandpiper. It was listed as a federally threatened species protected under the Endangered Species Act in 1986. To insure plovers can find a good place to nest and raise their young, the United States Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) temporarily ropes areas to protect the breeding birds from pedestrians, pets and vehicles since disturbance can cause the birds to abandon the site or could result in eggs being unknowingly crushed. Once the female lays eggs, the pair will take turns incubating the eggs for about a month. Once hatched the chicks are up and running about feeding on small insects and invertebrates in the intertidal zone. Chicks are most vulnerable at this time until about 5 days old, when their chances for survival start to increase.

Until they can fly, chicks respond to vehicles, predators, and pedestrians by “freezing” and crouching down in the sand to hide, becoming almost perfectly camouflaged. It will take them about for four weeks to develop wings and learn to fly. Vehicle operators may accidentally run over and kill plover chicks without even knowing it. Some even get trapped in tire tracks, too little to get out and die from sun exposure and lack of food. They look like “cotton balls with long yellow legs”, scurrying up and down the beach, looking for food in the washed up seaweed.

Since being listed in 1986, piping plover numbers in the state have increased from 10 pairs to 86 pairs in 2011 as a result of this work outlined in the USFWS Atlantic Piping Plover Recovery Program. This program is funded by a State grant made possible through a match provided by landowners and volunteers. Landowners contribute matching funds in a variety of ways from employing security guards to hiring naturalists, as well as educate the public, and play a key role in increasing our presence on the beach. The continued success of this program can be directly attributed to many partnerships, willingness of landowners, conservation organizations and government agencies who all work together to protect this rare, charismatic shorebird.

What people can do help:

- Respect all areas fenced or posted for protection of wildlife.
- Do not approach or linger near piping plovers or their nests when visiting beaches where plovers are making a home.
- Please leave pets at home. Plovers perceive dogs as predators, whether they are leashed or not.
- Don't leave or bury trash or food scraps on beaches. Garbage attracts predators which may prey upon piping plover eggs or chicks.
- Volunteer!



Piping plover scrape with plover tracks. USFWS



Photo taken at Napatree Point by Janice Sassi, 2011.



Banded Plover at East Beach Watch Hill. Taken by Russ Thompson, 2010.



Piping plover chick. USFWS